

UNDONE  
BY  
PEARL O'BRIEN

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Visual Art and the Graduate Faculty  
of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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Date Defended:  
4/10/14

The Thesis Committee for PEARL O'BRIEN  
certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Mary Anne Jordan

Date approved:  
4/10/14

My thesis work is a project about relationships. Context is important to me, and I have long considered the connection between my work and the work that came ahead of it to be vital. The process of working creates a space of reflection. From within this space I work with the material at hand to reveal truths about myself and about it.

My thesis project, *Undone*, is a project about relationships. This body of work explores relationships between my work and art that came before it, between myself and the material at hand and between myself and other people, as well as the physical relationship that layers of material have with one another.

My art during the first half of graduate school was centered around my love of and experience with on-loom weaving. During my second year at the university of Kansas I began to see the loom as more and more of a limiting tool and less of an apparatus providing opportunity. When presenting woven work in critiques, I found that the discussion tended to be about how it was made and not about the art itself. More frustrating than this even were the comments made by people who stated that because my work was textile, they really did not know what to think of it. These observers, including some experienced art viewers and professors, allowed themselves to be limited by antiquated ways of categorizing artistic mediums. My move towards working sculpturally with industrial felt thus allowed me to avoid having this struggle directly, while still engaging in a political conversation about the value of fiber in art.

Context is important to me, and I have long considered the connection between my work and the work that came ahead of it to be vital. Since

undergraduate school I have been interested in the intersection between art and craft, particularly as it relates to textiles. Strong influences on my woven work have included two artists who gained prominence during the 1960's, Sheila Hicks and Lenore Tawney. Both were female artists, primarily known for their weaving, who were at the forefront of the emergence of fiber art in the United States. Hicks bravely created pieces that were not obviously finely crafted, defying the accepted standard for fiber art. Her influences- primarily traditional South American weavers- were clearly visible in her work. Tawney took a different approach, innovating ways of creating unexpected (non-rectangular) shapes for her woven pieces, and even designing an open reed for her loom in 1962<sup>1</sup>, which assisted with this.

Both of these artists, by taking textile art out of its traditional utilitarian position, upset and challenged critics. Hicks and Tawney were included in a 1969 textile show titled *Wall Hangings*, which was written about by Louise Bourgeois. "If they must be classified," she wrote of the pieces in the show, "they would fall somewhere between fine arts and applied arts."<sup>2</sup> This opinion summed up the general feeling held at the time about fiber art; it was impossible to completely separate it from its association with functional textiles.

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<sup>1</sup> Elissa Auther, *String, Felt, Thread* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread*, 33.

Robert Morris began to work with industrial felt in 1967. Morris' influence on the fiber art scene at this time was significant, largely because, as a male and an established artist, his soft sculpture was taken seriously in a way that fiber art done by women at the time, was not. Despite the visual references that this felt work had to textiles and home furnishings, Morris escaped the type of criticism that people identified as "fiber artists" endured. His work was hailed as serious art. Critic John Perrault went so far as to say, in 1969, that "one takes for granted" the quality of his work.<sup>3</sup> Morris bridged boundaries between craft and fine art by working in soft sculpture. His ability to do this, emphasized by his being both a male and an outsider to the fiber art community, underscores gender inequities that existed, and still exist in the art community. One reason for my work with industrial felt is to continue this conversation, and to continue to challenge the boundaries between sculpture and textiles, craft and fine art.

Perhaps because of my lack of formal training as a sculptor, my process in working with felt is to create without a specific form in mind. My interest is in engaging with the material to reveal its potential. By weaving strips of felt I am bringing a distinct reference of fiber art to this non-traditional body of work. Stretching and manipulating the felt, building strength and structure through weaving, allows the felt to take on form and dimension that it otherwise lacks. I

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<sup>3</sup> Auther, *String, Felt, Thread*, 60.

view *Undone* as a small piece of an ongoing dialogue about what is accepted and respected as fine art. In a personal way, each piece reveals both the hand and the sentiment of the maker. Evidence of “the hand” in fiber art has long been one excuse for why it has not been highly regarded. Creating work that does not hide the process is my way of countering this history.

My hand and mind engage together in my studio practice. By this I mean that the physical act of creating allows for a contemplative and at times cathartic frame of mind that in turn impacts my engagement with the material. There is a connection between the mental challenge of processing personal history and the physical challenge of manipulating felt. Through revealing the potential of the material, I am seeking my own potential as well. Although I have never made representational or personally narrative art, my story is what drives my work.

## Bibliography

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